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Origins and Early Growth of the Pentecostal Movement and the Assemblies of God

The Pentecostal Movement started with revival in the first years after 1900 and grew into the most significant religious movement of the twentieth century. Participants in the revival were baptized in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues, like the disciples and followers of Jesus on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost in Acts chapter two, and thus the twentieth-century participants were called “Pentecostals.” The Pentecostals often exhibited other supernatural spiritual gifts such as prophecy, interpretations, healings, along with other manifestations of nine gifts of the Spirit given in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. The Pentecostal Movement emphasized five things: “1) holy living, 2) the fundamental doctrines of evangelical Christianity, 3) the baptism in the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues, 4) the gifts of the Spirit including divine healing [as being active in the church today], and 5) a premillennialist view of the return of Christ” (Smeeton 221). Synan documents that as of 2001, more than 200 million people worldwide are classified “denominational Pentecostals,” making Pentecostals the second largest Christian denominational group next to Roman Catholics (“Pentecostal” 1-2). Of the Pentecostal denominations, the Assemblies of God has grown to be the largest in the United States and in the world since its beginnings in 1914. The revival of the Pentecostal Movement and the Assemblies of God began after centuries of decline of spiritual gifts in the church.

While the Bible is clear that the early church encountered miracles and spoke in tongues after being baptized in the Holy Spirit, there was a decline of spiritual gifts in the centuries following. Observation of this decline has led some to believe that these supernatural gifts were given only to establish the church and the Bible and then were withdrawn by God either when the last apostle died or soon before then or when the canon of Scripture was closed, in part due to a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 13:8. Synan believes the power and gifts of the Spirit began to slip away from the formerly persecuted church after the fourth-century “triumph of Christianity in the West under Constantine” and when the church “turned more and more to ritualistic and sacramental expressions of faith” (*Latter* 27). Others point to “unbelief within the church” or “formalism, secularism, modernism, and acculturation” as reasons for the decline of the gifts (Hinson 189). Gee points to John Wesley’s reason that love was “waxed cold” (20). Later in the fourth century, theologian St. Augustine observed that the church was experiencing very few miracles so he proposed the “cessation theory” that “relegates spiritual gifts and commonplace miracles to only the apostolic age” (Horner 11). Critics of modern Pentecostal experience usually quote Saint Augustine’s “cessation theory” in his homily that tongues were “signs that were adapted to the times [apostolic age]” and then “passed away” (qtd. in MacArthur 233). “Later in life, however, Augustine shows great interest in the supernatural and relates many miraculous incidents in his own life and in the lives of others” (Hyatt 44-45) and documents seventy healings that he personally verified in “The City of God” (DeArtega 70). In spite of Augustine’s change in views, many over the centuries have chosen to focus on and repeat his earlier statements.

Contrary to the view that the gifts had ceased after the apostolic age, Hinson documents that glossolalia, or speaking in other tongues, was experienced in sections of the church

consistently up until A.D. 250 and also after A.D. 1650, and sporadically between those dates (183-97). Hyatt makes a convincing case in his book that the gifts of the Holy Spirit survived from the first century to the present time, including the Middle Ages (9-133). Synan says, “There was never a time from St. Paul to the present that there wasn’t somebody somewhere praying through and receiving the Holy Spirit—in monasteries, in convents, among monks and nuns . . . God did pour out showers of blessings throughout all these years . . . but the church did let these things slip generally over the years” (Outpouring). “Since the Apostolic Age, historians have catalogued at least two dozen renewal movements in the Church that have exhibited Pentecostal or charismatic experiences” (Menzie’s “Lessons”), and “Pentecostalism in most of its forms has existed throughout Christian history in both Eastern and Western churches” (Burgess and Van Der Maas 1227). However, not until the 1900s has there been such a widespread emphasis on the Holy Spirit and His gifts (Hyatt 1) and a renewal movement that has “survived long enough to make a lasting impression on the Church” (Menzie’s “Lessons”).

The modern Pentecostal movement had its theological roots in the teachings of John Wesley and the Methodist movement of the eighteenth century and the Holiness movement of the nineteenth century. Wesley wanted to get back to New Testament Christianity and taught a “second blessing” or “second work of grace” that he called “entire sanctification,” which according to his friend and designated successor, John Fletcher, was synonymous with the Baptism in the Holy Spirit (Synan Outpouring). In the next century, some saw the Baptism in the Holy Spirit as an experience subsequent to salvation that gave divine empowerment for service instead of, or in addition to, a cleansing of the heart. According to Dayton, “by the mid-1890s almost every branch of the Holiness and ‘higher life’ movements of the nineteenth century, as well as the revivalism of the period in general, was teaching a variation of some sort or another on the baptism of the Holy Spirit” (107-08) along with “all the basic themes of Pentecostalism except for the experience of glossolalia, or ‘speaking in tongues’” (167). In this holiness era, “speculation abounded concerning the actual biblical evidence of Spirit baptism,” and the link between it and speaking in tongues was first made by Charles Fox Parham in 1901 (Hyatt 140).

Many scholars see the birth of the modern Pentecostal movement as January 1, 1901 when Agnes N. Ozman, a thirty-year old student, spoke in tongues after praying and being baptized in the Holy Spirit at Parham’s Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. Two days later many of her classmates and Parham had also spoken in tongues after being baptized in the Holy Spirit (Martin 24-25). Parham, a former Methodist pastor who affiliated with the Holiness movement, was the first to formally state and “single out ‘glossolalia’ as the only evidence of . . . the baptism with the Holy Ghost, and . . . that it should be a part of ‘normal’ Christian worship rather than a curious by-product of religious enthusiasm” (Synan *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement* 99). After the January 1st experience, Parham began teaching this view which “laid the initial foundation for the modern Pentecostal Movement” (Snyder with Runyon 40).

Other scholars date the movement’s birth to the Azusa Street Mission revivals in Los Angeles, conducted by William J. Seymour from 1906-09. Prior to this, Seymour attended a Bible School in Houston Texas that Charles Parham started in late 1905 after preaching in the Midwest. In the days of segregation, Parham allowed the eager black Holiness preacher Seymour to sit at the doorway of the meetings so that he could hear and learn Parham’s Pentecostal teachings. After a few weeks, Seymour was invited to Los Angeles to assist in the pastorate of a black Holiness church. Noll describes Seymour as a “mild mannered black holiness preacher” (151). Yet after preaching his first sermon and emphasizing tongues, he had “unintentionally offended his pastor” by announcing that she and her followers had not truly experienced the

baptism in the Holy Spirit, as they thought they had when they became sanctified, since they had not spoken in tongues--the evidence of having the genuine experience (Valdez with Scheer 18). After being locked out of this Nazarene church, he was invited to Richard and Ruth Asberry's home on Bonnie Brae Street, where integrated congregations prayed for revival and learned from Seymour about speaking in tongues. On April 9, 1906, revival started as Seymour prayed for Mr. Lee who had a vision earlier, and Mr. Lee spoke in other tongues as he received the baptism. Excited, Seymour shared this with others at the Asberry home and soon he and seven others were in ecstasy and spoke with other tongues for the first time. Continuous prayer, praise, and worship exuded for days (Owens 59-61). Within a week, as larger crowds came, a new location was needed, so they moved the meetings to an old abandoned two-story building at 312 Azusa Street on April 14. From all the excitement, the *Los Angeles Times* on April 18, 1906 explained the meetings with the headline "Weird Babel of Tongues; New Sect of Fanatics Is Breaking Loose; Wild Scene Last Night on Azusa Street" (qtd. in Blumhofer *Restoring* 57). People came from all over the country and overseas, some out of curiosity from reports, and thousands came to Christ at the Azusa Street Mission. For the next three and one-half years, seven days a week, three services a day (Synan "Pentecostal" 4), "with great vigor" believers exhibited gifts of the Spirit such as speaking in tongues, prophecies, healings, and other miracles (Gonzalez 255). Services were long and spontaneous with a cappella music, singing, long testimonies and spontaneous preaching punctuated by shouts of "Amen", prayer, falling down in the Spirit, and altar calls for salvation, sanctification, and baptism in the Holy Spirit (Robeck 346; Owens 71). Most who attended were "poor and southern" (Marty 419). Racial harmony of blacks and many whites was noticed by Bartleman saying, "the 'color line' was washed away in the blood" (54). Leadership roles were exhibited by blacks and whites, men and women; this blending of the races and sexes ran against the norms of society, and brought further persecution (Owens 67). According to Owens, "the revival had two peaks, from 1906 to 1909 and again from 1911 to 1912" (75). During the lull, Seymour was still the pastor of the small, primarily African-American, Azusa Street Mission, but as he journeyed to the East for about a year, William F. Durham of Chicago came to Azusa for a preaching mission in February 1911 and the second peak of meetings began (Owens 77-79). As a participant in both peaks, Bartleman joyfully wrote of the second, "The fire began to fall at old Azusa as at the beginning" (150).

Many view the modern Pentecostal Movement as having two co-founders: the Reverend Charles Fox Parham (who brought the theological distinctive) and William J. Seymour who brought the Pentecostal experience to the attention of the world. Others within the Pentecostal Movement often claim that no individual or group was the father of it, but insist it had a divine origin from heaven (Brumback 48-63). Due to people in different denominations "sincerely seeking by prayer and supplication a spiritual awakening in their own hearts," a spiritual revival "fell simultaneously in the year 1906, in different parts of the world," stemming from a "mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit" (Dalton 9). According to Smeeton, as reports of Azusa Street experiences spread worldwide, "in different parts of the world, individuals testified that they had received the Pentecostal blessing even before the [Azusa] Street meetings" (234). "Reports poured in of other Pentecostal outpourings in Latin American, Africa, Europe and the islands of the seas. The revival, without any organized agenda, was exploding in numbers and influence around the world. By 1908, the movement had taken root in over fifty nations" (Hyatt 161).

Participants in the revival, who testified of speaking in other tongues, were not welcomed back into their former churches. As a result, many broke from their denominations, forming new and smaller churches throughout the country, and some of these did not want to organize beyond

the local assembly. Several Wesleyan sects in the Southeast rallied together to form Pentecostal organizations including: Church of God in Christ, led by black C. H. Mason; the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), led by A. J. Tomlinson; and the Pentecostal Holiness Church, led by J. H. King. These groups believed in “three distinct steps in the order of salvation (conversion, sanctification, and Holy Ghost baptism)” (Wacker 6). William Durham introduced a modified view of sanctification, rejecting an instantaneous sanctification and opting for a progressive sanctification that starts at conversion. He called his new teaching “The Finished Work” which failed to influence the southern Pentecostal Groups, since they were “steeped in the holiness movement,” but it was very influential in all new Pentecostal groups that formed (Synan *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition* 150-52). Soon evangelicals of a Reformed background (Baptists and Presbyterians) were touched by the power of the Holy Spirit and influenced by William Durham’s doctrine of progressive sanctification, and many of them eventually formed the Assemblies of God in 1914 (Blumhofer *Assemblies* 130, 218). The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel was formed in 1927 by evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson after she left the Assemblies in the early 1920s. These latter groups, not having a Holiness background, recognized only two distinct steps in salvation “(conversion-sanctification and Holy Ghost baptism)” (Wacker 6). Prior to the formation of these new Pentecostal churches, distance and limited communication left them feeling isolated and open to problems. To bring a sense of singularity, numerous publications appeared telling of the revival.

In 1913 a Pentecostal publication, the *Word and Witness*, called for the independent churches to band together for five reasons: “doctrinal unity, conservation of the work, foreign missions interests, chartering churches under a common name for legal purposes, and the need for a Bible training school” (“Our History”). The first meeting was held in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in April 1914. It brought together about 300 church leaders from twenty states and several foreign countries, opening with three days of prayer and preaching before business was discussed. Apprehensive about creating another denomination, those attending agreed to form a loosely knit fellowship of independent churches, “leaving each congregation self-governing and self-supporting” (“Our History”). The name incorporated for legal identity became “The General Council of the Assemblies of God.” Acting as chairman and secretary for the conference were E. N. Bell and J. Roswell Flower, respectively, who were then also elected to fill those posts (Menziez *Anointed* 98, 104). As the first general superintendent, Bell was well-educated and an able leader, formerly a Baptist pastor prior to his Pentecostal experience at a Durham meeting.

Three doctrinal issues confronted and molded the Assemblies: the holiness teaching of a sanctification experience or “second blessing”, a baptismal formula using Jesus’ name only--based on a one-person view of God, and speaking in tongues as one of many signs of the baptism with the Holy Spirit (Blumhofer *Restoring* 124). In 1916 a set of fundamental truths was affirmed by the General Council that provided a clear stance on important doctrinal issues, thus setting the Assemblies apart from those in the Holiness-Pentecostal camp and the Oneness camp, by affirming that holiness was not a “second blessing” but a process and by affirming the doctrine of the Trinity and the Trinitarian baptismal formula. In 1918, prominent leaders in the Assemblies submitted persuasive articles to a Christian magazine affirming the “classical Pentecostal position on tongues” as the initial physical evidence of being baptized in the Holy Spirit and was emphasized with a resolution at the 1918 General Council (Blumhofer *Restoring* 136-37). The baptism in the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues has been a distinctive for the Assemblies and has provided “empowerment for Christian witness in the last days before the imminent return of Christ” (McGee 120). Sociologist Poloma believes that the

Assemblies has grown tremendously partly because of its emphasis on experiencing the supernatural, thus providing “an alternative to a secularized and rationalized Christianity that has permeated so much of mainline denominations” (90). As of 2005, with the help of evangelism and missions, the Assemblies of God has grown to more than 2.6 million adherents in the United States and over 48 million overseas (“Our History”), making it the largest of the Pentecostal denominations.

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